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SUBJECT: THREE HCMC HOUSE CHURCHES SEEK LEGALIZATION, BUT IT'S SLOW GOING

REF: A) HCMC 1082; B) HCMC 847 and previous; C) Hanoi 2763

1. (SBU) Summary: Leaders of three house church organizations headquartered in HCMC -- Baptist, Mennonite and Seventh Day Adventist -- have applied to legalize their operations in HCMC, the first such applications under Vietnam's legal framework on religion. Although they have the legal right to register their entire national organizations with the central-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), they have been "guided" to apply first for their HCMC operations only. These house church leaders have decided not to challenge the CRA on this point of law; they do not want to rock the boat when conditions for their churches are improving throughout southern Vietnam. In our discussions with the HCMC CRA, we pressed for clear and faithful implementation of the legal framework writ large and for a proactive and constructive approach in these three groundbreaking cases. (Ref A discusses the status of the Danang-based United World Mission Church, which also is seeking to legalize its status under Vietnam's new legal framework on religion.) End Summary.

Vietnam Southern Baptist Convention

2. (SBU) In mid-October, PolOff met with Pastor Le Quoc Chanh, the President of the Vietnam Southern Baptist Convention (VSBC), one of at least seven Baptist organizations operating in southern and central Vietnam. According to Chanh, the church has approximately 2,200 adherents, including 500 in HCMC. Active in Vietnam for over thirty years, the church has two ordained pastors and 60 lay preachers. He stressed that "this is a real [head] count and not an inflated number like those given by other organizations." HCMC congregations gather daily. In other provinces, worshippers meet at least once a week. Currently, the VSBC operates one church building in HCMC, with capacity for over 200. However, this church will be demolished in 2006 as the city widens the road to the airport. The VSBC plans to build a new church in partnership with a Korean Protestant church, and hopes that government compensation, along with fundraising, will cover the building costs of the new structure. The VSBC also has an additional 60 gathering points throughout the country.

3. (SBU) The VSBC appears to have good lines of communication with Government and Party. Chanh told us that, even before the Ordinance on Religion and Faith came into effect in November 2004, officials of the Central-level Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) approached officials of the VSBC and suggested that they submit a history of their organization and activities prior to 1975 in preparation for the group's eventual recognition. Chanh noted that, after he submitted the requested paperwork, it became easier for VSBC to meet and organize and police harassment stopped almost completely. Following the promulgation of the Implementing Guidelines to the Ordinance in March 2005, the HCMC CRA encouraged the VSBC and two other HCMC-based groups (Mennonites and Seventh Day Adventists) to register according to the new legal framework on religion. The VSBC submitted its application along with supplemental documents in August 2005. (The Implementing Guidelines mandate a 45-day time frame for consideration of a registration application, 60 days if the church has a presence in more than one province. There is a 60-day window for applications for recognition for single-province churches, 90 days for multi-province operations. Recognized churches are given additional rights under the GVN's two-tier system. Please see HCMC 288 and HCMC 238 for additional details on Vietnam's legal framework on religion.)

4. (SBU) In a November 2 phone conversation with us, Chanh said that he had just confirmed with the CRA that the VSBC's application was complete. The CRA gave no indication when a decision would be forthcoming. Chanh has no intention of pressing the matter, as the process is not a top priority for the church. He fretted that bureaucratic sluggishness and obstruction could pose a problem for the VSBC once it was legalized. He cited the example of two unrecognized Baptist denominations that were seeking to establish a children's program. One did not seek official permission and was able to complete their project. The other group

"went through the proper channels and had a lot of problems with paperwork." On the other hand, Chang said that, upon recognition, the VSBC will petition to regain church property in HCMC, Nha Trang, Dalat, Cam Ranh, Quy Nhon and Danang that GVN had confiscated in 1975.

Mennonite Church

15. (SBU) Also in mid-October, we met with Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, President of the Mennonite Church in Vietnam, to review progress in legalizing his church's operations. (Ref B reports on prior meetings with Pastor Trung.) Trung said that his house church organization, which has over 8,000 worshippers and 120 pastors and preachers, "does not have problems, as the CRA knows everything that we do." Although the church is not yet registered, it is able to conduct "normal activities," such as holding organizational meetings of pastors from different provinces on a quarterly basis. Parishioners are able to gather for Sunday worship, even in the Central Highlands provinces of Kontum, Gia Lai and Dak Lak. Local governments also allow the church to gather to celebrate other holidays with advance notification. Since 1979, the Mennonite church has sent letters to the GVN asking for return of four confiscated properties; Trung is hopeful that he may gain some traction on the issue once his church is legalized.

16. (SBU) Trung's Mennonite church has been working with the HCMC CRA since April on legal registration for its HCMC operations. Most of the paperwork is complete -- there are at least nine extensive forms that the applying church had to submit -- but the HCMC CRA was seeking clarification of the status of Pastor Trung's house as a place of worship for the Church. In early November, Trung answered this final CRA query, technically starting the 45-day clock within which HCMC authorities must rule on his application.

17. (SBU) Like the VSBC, Truong was in no rush to legalize his church's status. Even though it has no official status yet, Trung stressed that many local authorities have been willing to help facilitate land purchase and church construction as long as the church could afford to buy land on its own. That said, registration appeared to be important to the GVN, which was why he was pursuing registration.

18. (SBU) Pastor Trung also spoke to the ongoing split within the Mennonite Church in Vietnam. The other faction, led by Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, former General Secretary of Trung's church, held an organizational meeting earlier this year while Quang still was in prison. That meeting declared Quang's wife Acting President of the Church until Quang was released and could assume the Presidency. According to Trung, that meeting violated the Mennonite Church's internal charter. Trung also alleged that other Mennonite pastors had been tricked into attending, having been invited to a Bible study. Trung noted that his church enjoyed the support of the Eastern Mennonite Mission Asia, while the North America Mennonite Church apparently supported Quang.

Seventh Day Adventists

19. (SBU) In mid-October, PolOff met with Pastor Tran Cong Tan and other members of the Seventh Day Adventist Church at their headquarters in HCMC. The Seventh Day Adventist church was established in Vietnam in 1914. In 1974, the Vietnam branch had 42 churches and approximately 15,000 followers, the majority of whom are from the ethnic minority community. The Seventh Day Adventists owned and operated two hospitals in HCMC. Post-1975, all its property, with the exception of seven churches, had been expropriated.

110. (SBU) According to Tan, as GVN repression of the church has eased in recent years, the number of worshippers has returned to pre-1975 levels. There are three Seventh Day Adventist churches in HCMC with between 600 and 2,000 members (the members of the board could not agree on the exact number of worshippers). There are another four churches and 35 other house church congregations operating across Vietnam, including the Central Highlands. Overall, conditions for religious freedom have improved significantly since the new legal framework on religion was promulgated, although there are episodic difficulties at the local level, particularly in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak. Tan explained that ethnic minority members of the church were suspected of supporting ethnic minority separatism and of participating in the "Dega Protestant Church."

111. (SBU) Every year since 1975, the Seventh Day Adventists had sent a request to Hanoi for recognition, which had gone unanswered. The situation began to change in mid-2004, when church leaders first met with HCMC CRA. The church began its formal registration process in June 2005. According to Cong, the church completed the application process in

August. Church leaders remained in constant contact with HCMC CRA. "If all goes well, the church will gain formal GVN recognition by the end of this year," commented Tan.

HCMC CRA

12. (SBU) On November 2 we met with Tran Ngoc Bao, HCMC CRA Vice Chairman in charge of Protestant and Catholic issues to review progress in registering churches and overall implementation of the legal framework on religion in HCMC. Bao emphasized his commitment to work with HCMC's house church organizations to regularize their status, and pointed to the significant improvement in religious freedom conditions for these groups in the city. (Our discussion on the status of the expatriate New Life Fellowship church will be reported by septel.)

13. (SBU) According to Bao, of the three house church organizations applying for legalization of status, only the Seventh Day Adventists had completed the needed paperwork. He expressed frustration that despite his urging, the other two groups were not responding promptly to CRA calls for additional information, slowing down the process. Bao said that house churches do not feel any urgency to register now that their day-to-day activities have been "normalized," albeit not fully legalized. Bao complained that other prominent Protestant house church organizations have thus far refused to begin the registration process, although overall dialogue with them has improved.

14. (SBU) Although Bao acknowledged that, under the law these groups had a right to apply immediately for nationwide registration, he "requested" that they start the process at the local level, in the jurisdiction where their headquarters is located. Nationwide registration would take place "later," at the discretion of the central-level CRA, which might also solicit additional information from the religious organizations.

15. (SBU) A leader from a second, larger Baptist house church group has told us that its efforts to register nationally were explicitly rejected by the central-level CRA. The group was told that each house church would have to register at the local level. Only when this process was completed would the central-level CRA consider their nationwide registration application. The central-level CRA official also complained to him that the Baptists had "too many different groups" and needed to merge into one, perhaps two organizations, before they could be considered for national recognition. As a result, the organization has decided not to pursue the process further at this time and is watching carefully the outcome of the three HCMC groups that have moved forward.

Comment

16. (SBU) The CRA's "encouragement" of the VSBC, Mennonites and Seventh Day Adventists to register locally may reflect uncertainty within the GVN and the Party over the implications of a sudden increase of newly legalized Protestant organizations throughout Vietnam. At the very least, the risk-averse Vietnamese bureaucracy is trying to feel its way through a brand new process. But if the CRA is playing it safe, so too are the three house church organizations. They have decided not to challenge the "guidance" of the CRA to apply locally even though under the law they had the clear right to apply for registration for their entire church organization with the central-level CRA. Their operating environment has improved significantly over the past year and they will not do anything to jeopardize progress at this juncture.

WINNICK